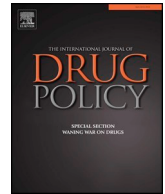




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Viewpoint

Eradication in the time of Covid: The case of Colombia

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Introduction

As usually happens in times of crisis and extreme situations, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to ongoing conflicts related to the cultivation of illicit crops in Colombia are a complex mix of change and continuity. In November 2016, the country's government, headed by then President Santos, and the main guerrilla, the FARC, arrived at a peace agreement including an explicit commitment to developing a national crop substitution program. Accordingly, the government set it up— the PNIS, or National Plan of Comprehensive Illicit Crop Substitution, —and allowed national and regional organizations of growers of coca, marihuana and poppy to operate legally, as long as they were committed to crop substitution. Both the government and the judicial system also came together to support the suspension of aerial fumigations. Aerial fumigation of coca crops has a long history in drug eradication campaigns in Colombia, and its implementation has almost always triggered waves of resistance (see for example Ramírez, 2001) due to its traumatic impacts on peasant livelihoods. However, a right-wing political party overtly hostile to the Peace Agreement won the 2018 elections. The new president, Iván Duque, has repeatedly equivocated regarding his overall support for the agreement. On the other hand, he has crucially undermined some of its key arrangements, especially the PNIS, which became one of the main targets of his government (Acero et al., 2019).

Thus, when the Covid pandemic arrived in the country three interrelated processes were already unfolding. First, the Colombian government was backtracking from the peace-related commitments and policies regarding illicit crops, and replacing them for a hard-nosed 'war on drugs' orientation. This involved the announcement of the creation of "future zones"; territories which would concentrate comprehensive state efforts to rapidly knock-out the drugs economy (Presidencia de la República, 2019). It also implied an effort to reinstate aerial fumigation, which was partially successful. In effect, the Constitutional Court ruled in July 2019 that aerial fumigation could resume, but only after consulting the population of the territories where the fumigation would take place through public hearings. It was related as well to a major offensive of manual eradication, which increasingly took the form of military operations (see the Guayabero case for

example (El Tiempo, 2020b)). The eradicators went into the respective area under the protection of the Army, the anti-narcotics police or the anti-riots police (ESMAD). Second, and due to this, coca growers increasingly had to resort to physically defending their plots (and livelihoods) from the attacks from the state security agencies. According to peasants organizations, during these confrontations four protesters have lost their lives (Colombia 2020, 2020a, 2020c; El Tiempo, 2020a; La Opinión, 2020). Third, the social mobilization by coca growing peasants was accompanied by generalized resistance and disquiet, leading to protests, with trust in the president falling below 30% throughout 2019 (EFE, 2019). In November 2019, hundreds of thousands of Colombians took the streets to vent their anger and frustration against several governmental policies.

Pushing forward a set of policies to defend Colombian families and children from drugs seemed to Duque and his team an ideal path to claw back elusive support of the electorate and legitimacy for his government. Paradoxically, however, his main trump card, aerial fumigation, was almost the only anti-drug policy rebuked by the vast majority of Colombians, with more than 75% of respondents supporting the suspension of aerial fumigations according to a survey implemented by the Ministry of Justice during Santos' presidency (Ministerio de Justicia, 2016). But when geopolitical considerations are taken into account, it becomes clear that the paradox is only apparent.

Drug eradication in geopolitical context

Enter Trump with a capital T. In the United States there had also been a change of government unfavorable to the peace process (Acero et al., 2019). President Santos had counted on at least some support by President Obama, despite the political sensitivities of the drug-related agenda, and even though the growth of illicit crops in Colombia after the peace process was signed had already annoyed the Americans (Méndez, 2018). Trump changed gears, putting much more pressure on the Santos and Duque governments and scolding Duque publicly for his failure to reduce the coca cultivation area (CNN, 2019). Indeed, for Trump, as for Duque, to appear to his base as "tough on crime" may have been quite important politically.

But there was more in the mix than the already big issue of electoral

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¹ This article was written in the context of the project Drugs & Disorder, <https://drugs-and-disorder.org/>. Many thanks to Tim Rhodes for extremely valuable feedback to a previous version of this text.

incentives. Trump and Duque have regional geopolitical interests that seemingly gradually aligned. Since Duque arrived in power, he advanced a very aggressive policy towards Venezuela, promoting its diplomatic isolation and perhaps even a regime change. Here, once again, his government equivocated, yet the Colombian former Vice-President and Ambassador in Washington, Francisco Santos, publicly as well as privately let it be known that the government would not be opposed to a United States invasion (CNN, 2018; *Semana*, 2019). It can be easily demonstrated that the United States itself took its time mulling about what to do with Venezuela –among other things because of strategic differences between Cold-war veterans like Bolton² and a more inconsistent and more Russia-friendly Trump. However, in the last months Trump himself took a decidedly more aggressive stance, and started to notify –through messages also shrouded in ambiguity—that actions *could* happen in relation to the Venezuelan regime. As part of this process, Venezuela was characterized as a criminal ‘narco-regime’ (BBC News, 2020). In the meantime, Duque was activating his ‘future zones’ in the frontier with Venezuela. The immediate target of the zones were illicit crops, but the fight against narcotrafficking and crime is broad enough to include any other target –including the guerrillas that operate in the region, and also potentially the Venezuelan regime officially tagged as ‘narco’ and ‘criminal’.

In sum, the context of Duque's forced eradication campaign is one of large and raising stakes, fundamental for Colombian politics, but involving forces that go well beyond the country, and also one in which two global wars, against drugs and against insurgency, are once again being linked. It is no wonder then, that the government actions and rhetoric transmit a clear message: drug eradication will be implemented regardless of any kind of opposition, even if the costs, political, human or otherwise, are very high.

Drug eradication in pandemic context

All this was already under way when the COVID-19 pandemic reached Colombia, in early March 2020. Yet, the pandemic *did* change the field of social and political forces shaping the drug eradication offensive, in general strengthening the position of the government, and putting the lives of coca growing peasants in a dire situation. Though heavily constrained, the coca growers have managed to resist as well as to innovate, as I argue below.

What then, were the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic? The popularity of the president bounced back to a level above 40% (Torrado, 2020). A reasonable explanation of the phenomenon, is that the epidemic crisis temporarily transformed the relationship between citizens and the state, allowing high placed officials to take the role of caretakers, technicians and social engineers providing solutions and help alongside necessary disciplinary guidance to the population (the latter is a very strong motive in Colombia for historical reasons). The COVID crisis also undermined the huge wave of social protest that was in full swing by the end of 2019. The ban on large gatherings, as part of COVID infection controls, crippled social protests. The lockdown in Colombia has been so prolonged and severe, that it has prevented any return of citizens to the streets. In these conditions, journalists, state control agencies and international observers have had much less access to different territories, which means that there the government is now much less subject to checks and balances. The Congress also has had only virtual sessions, with its capacity to provide any semblance of checks and balances radically curtailed. Endowed with greater support, and subject to much weaker controls, the pandemic context presents an ideal environment for the government to pursue politically sensitive or overtly unpopular policies such as the return to coca crop eradication.

² John Bolton was a former national security adviser to the Trump administration. His recent book (2020) actually illustrates well the abrupt changes in the policy with respect to Venezuela that took place while he held his position.

An example of this is the allowance of the entry of United States soldiers to the Future Zones, without the permission of the Congress (there is an ongoing discussion regarding the mandatory nature of such permission).

While this was taking place, the COVID pandemic was affecting coca cultivation and the livelihoods of coca-growing peasants in other critical ways. Due to radical restrictions in national and international transportation, the coca economy appears to have been seriously disrupted. There is the suggestion, for instance, that large traffickers and distributors in the United States and elsewhere are selling their stock and buying much less new product, reducing the price of coca produced by farmers (Faiola & Chauvin, 2020). Additionally, the crisis has affected the agricultural sector as a whole. It must be remembered that most coca-growing peasants dedicate a significant portion of their lands to crops other than coca (Marín et al., 2020; Ministerio de Justicia & UNODC, 2012).

It may also be the case that during the Covid crisis coca growers are suffering new forms of non-state violence (of state-implemented violence I will speak about in a moment). It is a fact, indeed, that homicide rates have fallen in Colombia (El Espectador, 2020). At the same time, in coca growing regions paramilitary and guerrilla successor groups, which were already aggrieved by the PNIS, are now putting strong pressure on the farmers and peasants not to engage in crop substitution. They need more than ever the rents coming from the coca business.

In reality, the peace process took out of the equation the main regulator of the coca economy in many regions, the FARC. Its absence destabilized many regional equilibria. At the same time, the agreements finally gave a legal voice to the coca cultivators. These two factors –the absence of the traditional regulator and of a more mobilized peasantry—made of peasant leaders the target of attacks coming from all kinds of armed actors. Furthermore, social leaders –many of whom are involved in the substitution program, with others linked to different activities—have lost a substantial part of the mobility that characterized, and protected, them in the immediate past. They now became fixed targets.

Even in this very unfavorable situation the governmental plans have been resisted in different forms and by different actors and forces. As seen above, checks and balances have been weakened but have certainly not disappeared. Since the Constitutional Court allowed aerial fumigation on the condition that public hearings were staged, and since large face-to-face gatherings were banned, the government pushed forward virtual gatherings, defending the notion that they would be good enough participation mechanisms. The first virtual hearings expeditiously approved the return of aerial fumigations. However, peasant organizations initiated a juridical action against this move, raising the strong and difficult to refute argument that a substantial portion of the Colombia rural producers are not connected online, and thus could not possibly participate in the discussions of an issue that was critical to their very livelihoods. Eventually, a judge ruled in favor of the peasant organizations, suspending the hearings, and thus temporarily blocking aerial fumigations. The government will continue insisting, and it is not clear how the controversy will be resolved (a very good account of the whole process can be found in (Duarte, 2020)).

Since aerial fumigation is not possible yet, manual eradication is now in full throttle. But manual eradication requires boots on the ground. Both the security agencies of the state and third-party observers could easily predict that peasants would not allow the destruction of their crops without putting up a fight to defend their livelihoods.

In consequence, even more so than before the arrival of COVID-19, coca eradications have been characterized by high levels of contestation, as well as by brutal, frequently deadly, state-violence. Such violence has involved the destruction of crops, but also the destruction and burning of huts and of peasant household items (Asociación de Campesinos del Sur de Córdoba, 2020). Heavily shielded and armed soldiers, anti-narcotics police and anti-riot police have attacked the peasants with gases, and have frequently opened fire against

them. In the Departments of Caquetá, Guaviare and Meta, hundreds of peasants (Caracol Noticias, 2020) rushed into the fields to prevent the eradications, and were brutally attacked by the Army and the police. Some of them were shot point blank, with several wounded (Marandúa Stereo, 2020). In Tumaco, eradication campaigns rapidly escalated, leading to shootings and deaths (Colombia 2020, 2020a). In the municipality of Sardinata, the peasants claim that one of them was victim of an extra-judicial killing (La Opinión, 2020). In the municipality of Zaragoza, peasants that were negotiating with men in uniform were suddenly shot at; six were injured (Teleantioquia Noticias, 2020).

The many videos that circulate on the Internet of these attacks against coca growing peasants—scrupulously called “clashes” by the Colombian media, as if they were a struggle between equivalent forces—record the peasants yelling to the soldiers: “Kill me!”, “Kill me if you want! This is what you have learnt to do” (see for example (Noticias RCN, 2020)). These screams are in a deep sense the Colombian equivalent of George Floyd’s “I can’t breathe”. They are a verbalization of a crisis situation by civilians who have been force-fed the knowledge that they can be murderously attacked by the state at any time: part synthesis of the appalling arbitrariness, illegitimacy and asymmetry of the attacks they are suffering, part a basic, fundamental call for their right to live.

Rights, promises, politics

In effect then, the demands of the coca growing peasants revolve around the right to live. They are raising three distinct but overlapping life-and-death demands. First, for their crops and livelihoods not be eradicated, especially during a pandemic situation, when economic survival is especially precarious. Crop eradication in the absence of substitution programming, and in a situation in which legal and illegal agricultures are sinking into a deep crisis, simply leaves the peasants without a way of making a living (Colombia 2020, 2020b). Eradicating crops is at once a war on livelihoods. Second, to not be shot at. That is, a right to life and to be protected from harm. And third, to be protected from the risks of COVID-19. The implementation of crop eradication efforts and how these combine with resistance on the ground unavoidably involve interactions, including through violent altercations, between people, thus risking transmission in a time of pandemic and population lockdown. There is the suggestion that members of the armed forces and the police coming into the territories to eradicate crops may be infected (Colombia 2020, 2020b).

Another strong argument by social organizations is that they have proved they are willing to fulfill their promises. The United Nations has corroborated that the overwhelming majority of peasants involved in the PNIS—well above 90%—have kept their promises (UNODC, 2019). So what is the point of pushing forward forced eradications in the midst of the pandemic? The government instead, as seen above, has reneged on almost all of its commitments. Indeed, although the Peace Agreement allowed the government to eradicate when needed, it clearly established that the main method to transform illicit agricultures was voluntary substitution. After basically dismantling the PNIS, Duque’s government is launching eradications even where there are explicit PNIS agreements and voluntary substitution processes in place (like in the Sardinata municipality which, as reported above, has been the epicenter of deadly incidents (Colombia 2020, 2020b)).

Army officers, in turn, have defended their actions claiming that a mob has placed them in extreme danger (Semana, 2020). Videos and independent reporting, however, tell another story: a story of peasants fighting with rocks and sticks against very well armed, trained and protected soldiers. Another important trope is that non-state armed groups are active in many of the regions where eradications take place, and that they have attacked both eradicators and government security forces. While this is true—which means that soldiers, policemen and eradicators are and will be relatively easily targeted—and was already happening during the Santos presidency, it is not the cause of the

peasant mobilization. Social organizations have actually denounced this very problem (COCCAM, 2020). It is difficult to understand how it is related to the alleged right of the armed forces or the anti-riots police to shoot against civilians. It is rather, an exemplary of the standard and reiterated *rhetoric* used to stigmatize coca-growing peasants (Ramírez, 2001), and clearly illustrates how the wars on drugs and subversion are converging yet again.

Conclusion

Contrary to García Márquez’ fabulous *Love in the Times of Cholera*, the current drug eradication campaign will hardly have a happy ending. It takes place in the midst of a massive health crisis, whose impacts and outcomes have many unknowns. The coca economy has been at least as strongly hit as legal sectors, not only because of the difficulty to access precursors but also because of the near interruption of aerial and terrestrial transport. However, more intense use of maritime routes might provide at least a partial substitute (UNODC, 2020). The long-term impacts of the pandemic on the coca business, however, are anyone’s guess. With respect to health, the majority of coca-growing regions hardly have access to public utilities and basic public goods, so as of today there is no estimation of how much has the pandemic spread there. But the situation in the Southern borderlands of the country, for example, seems to be nothing short of alarming (El Tiempo, 2020c). By giving origin to many new and very physical human interactions and gatherings—confrontations, mobilizations—the governmental campaign can only contribute to worsen the situation in coca producing regions, whatever it presently is.

It represents as well a clear violation of the spirit and probably also of the letter of the Peace Agreement. It seems to lack, as I have noted above, any sort of democratic legitimacy. It is supported on overt violence and on increasingly aggressive attacks against civilians—putting them in the dilemma of defending themselves through high-cost high-risk mobilizations or losing their livelihoods. That this eradication campaign is apparently tolerated by the so-called international community, reveals perhaps better than any other indicator the size of the stakes and the political forces involved in the whole operation.

Declaration of Competing Interests

a.) Funding sources for the work. List all funding sources for the work. If none declare “None” Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) and SOAS, University of London. b.) Competing interests. Do you have any competing interests to declare; including any direct or indirect connections with the alcohol, gambling, tobacco or pharmaceutical industries. If none declare “None”; if yes, please describe. None. c.) Have you obtained ethical approval for the conduct of your study? The article is articulated with the project Drugs and (dis) order: Building sustainable economies in peacetime after the war. This project had the approval of an ethical committee. Funding source: project Drugs and Disorder, <https://drugs-and-disorder.org/>

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